

“Seeing the Unseen”

Rev. David Gregory

April 7, 2019

Fifth Sunday in Lent



Forgiven
Daniel Gerhartz

First reading

John 12:1-8, from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Six days before Passover, Jesus entered Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living. Lazarus and his sisters invited Jesus to dinner at their home. Martha served. Lazarus was one of those sitting at the table with them. Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anointed and massaged Jesus' feet, and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house.

Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, even then getting ready to betray him, said, "Why wasn't this oil sold and the money given to the poor? It would have easily brought three hundred silver pieces." He said this not because he cared two cents about the poor, but because he was a thief. He was in charge of their common funds, but also embezzled them.

Jesus said, "Let her alone. She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me."

Second reading

from Richard Rohr in *Everything Belongs*

Spirituality is about seeing—seeing things in their wholeness, which can only be done through the lens of our own wholeness. That is the key! It's about taking responsibility for our way of relating to things rather than aiming for any kind of perfect results or necessary requirements. Once you see skillfully, the rest follows. You don't need to push the river, because you are already in it My life is not about me; it is about God, and God is about love. When we don't know love, when we experience only the insecurity and fragility of the small self, we become restless, violent, and hateful. But in contemplation we move to a different space where we see the illusion of separateness.

(Editor's note: This written message is different from the one Rev. David ended up delivering out loud, but it is worth reading nonetheless.)

We've been on quite a journey these last five weeks. In many ways, Lent seems like a familiar journey to a familiar place. There are times, of course, when we are headed down the road somewhere, and body memory takes over. We're doing something we've done so many times before that we do not have to think about it. It's like the other day when I turned left up the hill toward where we live, instead of continuing down Tiburon Boulevard toward the church. My brain wasn't engaged, and so my body—which is also a brain—did what it

does, and turned the car when I would have intended not to. Lent in particular is about intentionality. In two weeks we will come to one of the more familiar destinations in our tradition. It's called Easter. But this year we are arriving from a direction different from what our body might be used to. We've chosen this other way of getting here intentionally because we wanted it to be a fresh challenge. The typical sixty-year-old, for example, has had a choice to live sixty different years, or to live the same year sixty times. Life lived by body memory gets us to the same destination on the same route every single time. Intentionality gets us to the same destination by a myriad different routes, making for a much richer and more beautiful journey.

This year we have viewed the season of Lent as a liminal space, a place to move through, a waiting area of sorts. And while we've been waiting, we've had time to look around us at the ground beneath our feet. We've taken time to plant some seeds in a well-cultivated ground that will give us food for the rest of the journey. And in the fruitfulness of this journey, we've returned like the prodigal to find forgiveness, or like the father who offered it, to enjoy beautiful reconciliations that make sense of our senselessness and keep us together as a single community of love and practice. Next Sunday we'll wave some palm branches as we move toward momentous events in Jerusalem that will challenge us to find the real reasons for being what we are and doing what we do. But for today we pause in a room with people that we love, those who understand us in ways that others do not, those who see the things that others do not. It is a very present moment on the journey as we wait in awe and watch a very intimate moment unfold.

Three siblings, Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus are among the dearest friends that Jesus has on this earth. They live in Bethany just east of Jerusalem near the Mount of Olives. Perhaps the best known episode in their lives is when Lazarus became ill and died. There is a dramatic scene found only in the Gospel of John where a grief-stricken Jesus stands outside a tomb and says, "Lazarus, come forth," followed by tears of joy and celebration. Jesus, on his last stop before the fateful week in Jerusalem, comes to these who are his family of choice, along with at least some of his disciples, and they have a dinner. This might be the same dinner that Luke writes about, but it could also be a different episode with the same people. On that occasion, Martha got angry because she was doing all the work of serving the meal while Mary just sat at Jesus's feet, hanging on to his every word. After this dinner, however, Mary takes an insanely expensive jar of oil and pours it over Jesus's feet and massages it into his feet with her hair. I would point out that this is highly unusual, even by California standards. And it creates a scene. Some in the room are dumbfounded. At least one of them is angered, and whoever is writing down this collective oral tradition definitely has it in for Judas Iscariot, because it is reported that his anger was motivated by the money he could have pilfered had Mary not been so wasteful. But Jesus puts a stop to all of this hoopla, telling everyone in the room to basically put a cork in it. Mary is seeing something. In the depth of her intuition she is noticing something that the others may be missing entirely. She has a deep sense that this is the last opportunity to dine with Jesus and to hear his voice, and to experience his teaching. She places a higher value on the present moment than on some potential future use of this ointment beyond making Jesus's feet smell prettier than they might otherwise have. In the weaving of the John story, Mary is anointing Jesus for his burial, something the disciples would have a hard time listening to, and certainly could not accept at the moment. But today this points us to something vital in our own journey, namely that the most important thing in all of life is to develop the capacity to live in the present moment.

Richard Rohr reminds us that contemplation moves us to a different space. I would call it the holiest of pause buttons, and one that we desperately need to push, before we get swept away in all "the crazy" around us. In this place we talk a lot about contemplative spirituality, about Celtic consciousness, about the spiritual practices of prayer, mindfulness, and meditation. At this point in our journey I would like us to be clear: Contemplative life is not about self-help, about reducing our blood pressure and helping us to manage stress. These are side benefits, and they do indeed happen along the way. But our model for contemplative life

today is Mary of Bethany, who for whatever reason and by whatever method has developed a greater ability to see. She has slowed herself down to the degree that she is not living by body memory, rattling dishes in the kitchen with Martha. She somehow knows that the dishes will wait. There will always be dirty dishes, but there will not always be this moment with Jesus.

I cannot say how many times I've said in the last few weeks: "I've just gotta get through Easter." There are folks who have contacted me to make appointments for meetings or gatherings that seem rather important, and I've said, "Well, let me get through Easter, and then we'll chat." The day after Easter I am flying to Rochester to spend time with my sister who is ill, and before purchasing a plane ticket, I thought to myself, "I need to get through Easter first." What is it inside of me that thinks I have to push the river along at a pace that is more to my liking than the one that is already present? Why can't I manage this environment to keep things running a bit more smoothly? On Friday, I unwillingly surrendered my day off in order to attend a mandatory six hour continuing education workshop in Boundary Awareness. As I drove over to the East Bay in a rainstorm, I grumbled about it, wondering why they'd scheduled this thing during Lent. Don't they know we are busy? Why can't we just get past Easter? As I arrived at the Hillcrest Congregational Church in Pleasant Hill, I answered a roll call by the conference minister, along with the likes of Dan Hatch, Curran Reichert, and John Mabry, and all the other busy professionals in the room. At one point, I said to Curran, "We finally get to meet face to face and it has to be at boundary training" And then something amazing happened. I don't have time to tell you about it this morning, but toward the end of the day we heard a personal story that was deeply profound, one that made me deeply grateful for this opportunity to stop, to push pause, to let the room be filled with the fragrance of expensive ointment. I spent my valuable time that I was guarding by the playbook of Judas Iscariot, sputtering and spewing as the keeper of my own calendar, and for a few moments I experienced some beautiful moments where someone saw what I wasn't seeing. I came away a different human being. And suddenly I knew what Richard Rohr meant when he said, "You do not need to push the river, because you are already in it."